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Strong, Independent Sisters

by Tracy K. Sams

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A Novel

**STRONG,
INDEPENDENT
SISTERS**

TRACY K. SAMS

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ISBN: 978-1-64438-471-8

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2018

First Edition

Chapter 1

Grace Underwood slammed her hand down on the alarm clock as it started blaring “It’s a Good Morning” by Mandisa. She groggily looked at the clock, which read 6 a.m. Grace groaned and rolled out of bed. She was a thirty-seven-year-old, single, successful real estate agent. She spent most of her time working, but lately had become a full-time caretaker to her nephews. A year before, her older sister had been diagnosed with breast cancer, so Grace had begun to help whenever she was needed.

Grace sleepily walked to the kitchen to start the coffee maker and grab a bite to eat. While she was pouring a bowl of cereal, her cell phone rang. Grace observed the number on the screen and hastily picked it up.

“Miss Underwood?”

Grace slowly drew a breath, then exhaled before replying, “Yes.”

“This is Tri-County Medical Center, and I’m calling to inform you that your sister was placed in ICU early this morning.”

Grace became agitated but tried to respond calmly. “What? Why was I not notified sooner?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but your sister asked us to wait and call you at this time.”

Feeling numb, Grace didn’t even reply to the nurse as she hung up the phone. She quickly got dressed, as so many things ran through her head. She thought, *I lost my mom nine years ago to pancreatic cancer. Will I lose my sister to cancer, as well? I can’t lose her now!* Once she was dressed, she grabbed her keys and sprinted to her car. She was tense and tried to calm herself by taking deep breaths.

Grace arrived at the hospital in record time. She was met by her father.

“Why didn’t you call me?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, honey, but I promised Emma that I wouldn’t. She wanted you to rest. Emma is conscious that you’ve been at the hospital every day, in addition to caring for her boys.”

Grace rolled her eyes and sighed. “How is she doing? Dad, I don’t know if I can take this.”

“Emma began to turn for the worse early this morning. She is in a lot of pain. The doctors have added a morphine drip to her IV. Grace, I don’t think Emma will make it through the day.” Her father became emotional and fought back tears. Grace embraced her father while thinking to herself, *This family has already lost so much.* Two years before her sister was diagnosed with breast cancer, her brother-in-law had been suddenly killed in a car accident.

Grace kept her composure and replied, “What am I going to tell the boys?”

He squeezed her shoulder. "Honey, we will get through this together. The Lord will give us comfort and strength."

Grace felt overwhelmed and silently prayed to the Lord to help give her the strength she needed. She followed her father into the hospital to the second floor. They approached Emma's room and quietly walked to her bedside. Grace observed that her sister was hooked up to several monitors. Emma's face was pale, and she had dark circles under her eyes. Grace's father bent down and kissed her on the forehead. Emma opened her eyes and faintly smiled at him. She then turned her head and smiled at her sister. Grace tentatively bent down and kissed her on the cheek, then sat on the edge of the bed. "Sis, how are you feeling?"

Emma pushed herself up in the bed and grimaced in pain. "Oh, you know me. Just hanging out and feeling great."

Grace knew that was her sister's way of making light of the situation. "Well, I don't want you to worry about a thing. I have been taking care of everything."

Emma patted Grace's hand and gently entwined it with hers. "Thank you. You know you mean so much to me. You have always been there for me."

Grace's voice hitched. "Hush now, and get some rest. You know you would have done the same for me." She sat beside her sister until she heard Emma's faint breathing and watched the rise and fall of her chest. Once she knew her sister was asleep, she tenderly released her hand from Emma's grasp and stood up. Grace whispered, "Dad, I'm going downstairs to the café to get some coffee. Do you want anything?"

“No, honey, I’m fine. I think I will try to nap, too.” Grace nodded in understanding. Her father had been staying nights with her sister while Grace helped with the boys after school.

“I won’t be gone long.” Grace walked to the elevator in a daze. She didn’t even notice the nurse standing beside her.

“Hi, my name is Tonya. Are you Emma’s sister?”

Grace snapped out of her reverie. “Oh, yes. My name is Grace.”

“Nice to meet you. I have been your sister’s nurse since last night.”

Grace hesitated but then asked, “Tonya, tell me this: Do you know how long my sister has to live?” She watched Tonya’s face morph in concern.

“It’s hard to say. It depends on the patient.”

Grace exhaled a slow breath. “Would you mind having a cup of coffee with me at the café?”

The nurse smiled her appreciation. “Sure. My shift just ended.”

Chapter 2

Grace and Tonya sat at a center table in the hospital café, drinking their coffees. Grace felt comforted when she shared with Tonya her concerns. Tonya spoke of her faith, and provided encouragement during their conversation. Grace glanced down at her watch and was surprised at the time. “Oh, my. I have been down here a long time. I better check on Emma and my father. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.”

“It was my pleasure. But before you go, I would like to invite you to a women’s group. I started it several years ago at my church. The group focuses on all aspects of women’s issues and needs. If you come, just look for the signs that say S-I-S.”

Grace looked at Tonya with a puzzled expression. “What does S-I-S stand for?”

Tonya softly chuckled and replied, “Strong, Independent Sisters. The group starts at seven p.m.”

Grace thanked Tonya again and wrote down the name and address of the church, as well as the time of the meeting. She returned to her sister’s room and found her father asleep in the blue reclining chair beside Emma’s bed. Her sister was awake and faintly smiled. Emma patted the side of the bed, motioning for Grace to sit down.

“Did you have a nice break?” Emma asked. Grace shared with her sister the conversation she had just had with the nurse, Tonya. “Well, I think you should go. It will be good for you to spend time with other people.”

Grace reflected and thought, *I haven't been out for a while, and I've been a caregiver for my sister's family for several months. Maybe I will check the group out.* Grace came back from her thoughts when she heard Emma ask for ice. “I will get you some.” She grabbed the empty cup on the bedside table near her sister. When she returned from the nurse's station with the ice, her father was awake and speaking softly with Emma.

“Would you like some privacy?” Grace asked.

“No, silly. Come in.” Emma weakly waved her hand to motion Grace over to her bedside. “Come, sit down by me. Dad and I have something to discuss with you.” Grace gently sat on the bed. “Now, this is going to be difficult to talk about, but Dad and I have decided this is the best time to do it.”

Grace looked at her sister with a pointed, quizzical expression. “What is it?”

Emma smiled. “Well, I just want to ask you if you are ready to be a part of the children's lives full-time, after I'm gone.”

Grace internally groaned. She really didn't want to discuss this now, but responded, “Of course I will. But don't talk like that. You will get better. The Lord still works miracles.”

“Grace, it's different this time. I'm tired of fighting.” Tears began to stream down Grace's cheeks. She quickly wiped her

face and looked away to regain her composure. “The doctor has told us that I only have a couple of more days to live, if that. The cancer has spread, and there is nothing more they can do for me. I have already given you and Dad power of attorney, and the children will be placed in your care once I’m gone. Grace, I’m ready to go home.”

Grace knew her sister meant heaven when she spoke of “home.” Tears once again began to form. She hated this and began to softly cry.

“Sis, don’t cry.” Emma patted Grace’s arm. “I just want to know that you are okay with becoming a mother of three amazing boys.”

Grace wiped her tear-stained face. “You know I am, and nothing will change that.”

“Good, I’m just worried about them because they have already lost so much, and I won’t be around to help or care for them.”

“Don’t worry, Emma. I will always be in their lives. I promise. Besides, Dad will be helping me, too.” Grace glanced across the bed at her father. She saw his tear-filled eyes and watched his tears run down his face. Grace was thankful that her father was a strong man of faith. She remembered how he had tenderly cared for their mother. Now he was doing the same for his daughter. Grace reached for her father’s hand and squeezed it.

Emma exhaled and wiped her watery eyes. “Now, enough of this crying. Dad, how are the boys doing?”

Her father cleared his throat before answering. “They are fine. I got them all to school on time. They ask about you every day. Speaking of that, Emma, they want to see you.”

Emma sighed. “Dad, I don’t know. They have already been through so much.”

“Honey, I believe it’s time.”

Grace interlaced her fingers with her sister’s for reassurance. “Dad is right, Emma. They are stronger than you know. I am sometimes amazed how they encourage me.”

“All right. Bring them by after school today.” She winced in pain.

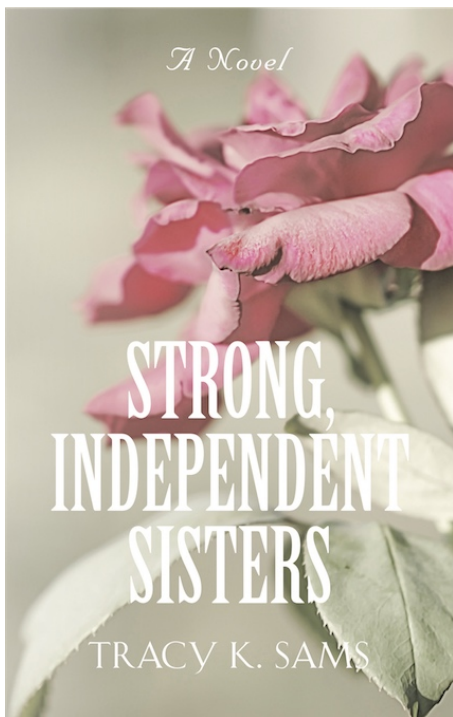
“Are you okay?” Grace squeezed her sister’s hand.

“I will be all right. The Lord is good.” Grace smiled. Emma always said this, no matter the circumstances.

Grace briefly hesitated before saying, “Dad, let’s give Emma time to rest.”

He nodded his head in silent agreement and stood from his chair. “Grace and I will be back later this afternoon with the boys.” He leaned over and kissed Emma on the forehead.

“Thanks, and I love you both.” Emma drifted off to sleep before she heard their responses.



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